

The Need of the London Stage.

By ELIZABETH ROBINS.

THE London playgoer has this year had to content himself with but two or three modern English plays on the boards that "count," such as Barrie's "Little Mary," and Pinero's "Letty," although neither "Little Mary" nor "Letty" can be held to have rejoiced their authors' admirers so much as certain earlier works.

With but two modern English plays on the boards at the moment that "count," the critical playgoer must rest content, for he shall look in vain in Shakespeare's London for any play of his, or of any other great dramatist of the past, English or foreign, acted in the English tongue.

The discriminating playgoer who cannot keep alight his enthusiasm for the theatre on a couple of plays a season (and he does not always fare so well), joins his voice to the small but waxing chorus that cries "National theatre!" "Subsidy!" or "Municipal support!"—not merely for one of the great arts, but for that one which is easily first as an engine of popular education.

We know how history, politics, and social ethics are mixed up with the story in many of the more notable French and German plays—much as such concerns are mixed up with the average intelligent life; and we have seen the response they elicit. Quite the most thrilled and excited audience I ever saw was that breaking in upon Antoine's production of "Les Tisserands," where the admirable art of the thing was pointed for thinking people by the labour disturbances of the hour, and you saw how the

remote grievances of some Silesian weavers of forty years ago could fire a Parisian audience with an excitement that did not end in the hot *entr'acte* controversy—passionate denial and fierce affirmation of the truth of the picture, drowned by threat of police

—but was followed the next day by an official order for the suppression of a play that taught too much and taught it wrong.

Those persons in this country—leaving out of the question the wider educational possibilities of the art, and concerning themselves only to prevent the art itself from being practically among the "lost"—those, like Mr. John Hare, who have not quite abandoned hope that the English stage can be "rescued from the abyss into which it is falling," have been taking heart on hearing of the Foreign Office inquiry through His Majesty's accredited representatives



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abroad, "as to the financial support given from State or Municipal resources to dramatic, operatic, or musical performances."

But those who hoped great things from the high official putting of the question, never doubting but it insured the interest and trouble requisite to answer it, will read of the result with a sinking of the spirit. If the comparatively easy task of finding out how others had met the question be carried through in so perfunctory a fashion, culminating in reports both inadequate and misleading, what prospect is there of inquiry, so inspired and so conducted, leading to any practical, useful end?

When one looks at the reports of these members of H.M. Corps Diplomatique, and even before fully realising how false are some of their findings, one is penetrated by the sense of the less than little these investigators know or care about this subject they have under consideration. And why, after all, should these gentlemen of the various British chancelleries develop all at once a competence to deal with a matter they have ignored with conspicuous success all their lives?

We know of people who do not go to the play for conscience sake, and we are tempted to think of them as among the few who have any conception of the possible potency of the theatre. Hardly so well equipped are some of these diplomatic gentlemen upon whose report the future of the English National Theatre is supposed to depend. It is true they have no doubt gone to the play now and then—when they had had nothing else to do, and might see something sufficiently trivial to ease them from the cares of State; the preparation, for instance, of such documents as the one Lord Lansdowne has elicited upon foreign theatres. No wonder these English investigators are unable to take the Stage seriously. For they are not like the conscientious objectors. They have seen it "now and then," chiefly in the form of "musical comedy," as Mr. Hare would say.

To expect the uninitiated to pick out the two grains of wheat in a season's bushel of chaff is to expect too much. It is as notorious that the average educated foreigner "knows about" plays and acting as that the average educated Englishman or American will be able to express himself with more understanding upon any question of general importance, upon any other department of art, than he will or can bring to bear upon the stage. We had a notable example of the fact not so very long ago in Parliament, when a question affecting the welfare of the theatre was handled *pour rire*.

The people who do care for the theatre are very reluctant to introduce the subject of a play in general conversation, conscious that they will find their interlocutor, like Professor Saintsbury, takes little interest in things "merely theatrical," or like another even better known man of letters, ready to remonstrate with a lady for leaving the dinner table. "Where are you going?" "To the theatre to see——" "Oh, my, who wrote it?" "Pincero." "Who is Pincero?"

You will often hear people saying they "go to the play when they are in Paris," but as for the home-made product, since they lost their taste for pantomime they have found nothing in the theatre to take its place except now and then a *girl* of some sort. And shall you expect men, with such associations connected with the words "English stage," to take the trouble necessary to prepare an adequate report upon the way the theatre is managed for people who are accustomed from childhood to see constantly (as in Germany and Austria) every sort of classical and modern play, till they actually do assist at each representation, contributing a many-sided taste, a memory, and a critical faculty that check, as well as inspire, the actor, and that build up the reputation of a school of playwrights that in England or America would be journalising or writing novels all their days? I am not one of those who believe that the London managers are frequently offered masterpieces which they wilfully reject. I don't believe in the existence of the masterpieces. I don't think they stand a chance of being born, until men of parts find more encouragement to turn their talents in the direction of the theatre; but I am equally convinced that the men who are making theatrical life on the Continent worth living would be doing something else if their Governments either left the fate of the theatre wholly in private hands (as happens in the English-speaking countries), or approached the question of a more honourable state of things in the spirit that seems to have inspired the form of the late official inquiry and the substance of the reply. After speaking of the crying need for an endowed theatre, Mr. Hare ends his letter:—

Unless some such reform takes place, unless public spirit or private enterprise come to the rescue, I foresee the time surely coming when the already few theatres devoted to the higher drama will still further dwindle in numbers and the octopus "musical comedy" gradually absorb them in its far-reaching grip.

It seems certain, at all events, that the subject cannot be successfully dealt with by superior persons who condescend to the theatre. For my part, I refuse to abandon my faith in the coming man, or group of men, with money or influence, who not only know what the theatre may be at its best, but who feel for it an unabashed love, leagues away from personal ambition.

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